

The Righteous Mind

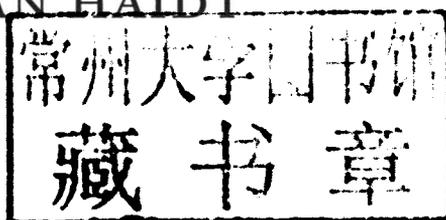
Why Good People
Are Divided
by Politics and
Religion

Jonathan Haidt

The Righteous Mind

Why Good People Are Divided by
Politics and Religion

JONATHAN HAIDT



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The Righteous Mind

*In memory of my father,
Harold Haidt*

I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them,
not to hate them, but to understand them.

—Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, 1676

Introduction

“Can we all get along?” That appeal was made famous on May 1, 1992, by Rodney King, a black man who had been beaten nearly to death by four Los Angeles police officers a year earlier. The entire nation had seen a videotape of the beating, so when a jury failed to convict the officers, their acquittal triggered widespread outrage and six days of rioting in Los Angeles. Fifty-three people were killed and more than seven thousand buildings were torched. Much of the mayhem was carried live; news cameras tracked the action from helicopters circling overhead. After a particularly horrific act of violence against a white truck driver, King was moved to make his appeal for peace.

King’s appeal is now so overused that it has become cultural kitsch, a catchphrase¹ more often said for laughs than as a serious plea for mutual understanding. I therefore hesitated to use King’s words as the opening line of this book, but I decided to go ahead, for two reasons. The first is because most Americans nowadays are asking King’s question not about race relations but about political relations and the collapse of cooperation across party lines. Many Americans feel as though the nightly news from Washington is being sent to us from helicopters circling over the city, delivering dispatches from the war zone.

The second reason I decided to open this book with an overused phrase is because King followed it up with something lovely, something rarely quoted. As he stumbled through his television interview, fighting back tears and often repeating himself, he found these words: “Please, we can get along here. We all can get along. I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try to work it out.”

This book is about why it’s so hard for us to get along. We are

indeed all stuck here for a while, so let's at least do what we can to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile groups, each one certain of its righteousness.

People who devote their lives to studying something often come to believe that the object of their fascination is the key to understanding everything. Books have been published in recent years on the transformative role in human history played by cooking, mothering, war . . . even salt. This is one of those books. I study moral psychology, and I'm going to make the case that morality is the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible. I don't mean to imply that cooking, mothering, war, and salt were not also necessary, but in this book I'm going to take you on a tour of human nature and history from the perspective of moral psychology.

By the end of the tour, I hope to have given you a new way to think about two of the most important, vexing, and divisive topics in human life: politics and religion. Etiquette books tell us not to discuss these topics in polite company, but I say go ahead. Politics and religion are both expressions of our underlying moral psychology, and an understanding of that psychology can help to bring people together. My goal in this book is to drain some of the heat, anger, and divisiveness out of these topics and replace them with awe, wonder, and curiosity. We are downright lucky that we evolved this complex moral psychology that allowed our species to burst out of the forests and savannas and into the delights, comforts, and extraordinary peacefulness of modern societies in just a few thousand years.² My hope is that this book will make conversations about morality, politics, and religion more common, more civil, and more fun, even in mixed company. My hope is that it will help us to get along.

BORN TO BE RIGHTEOUS

I could have titled this book *The Moral Mind* to convey the sense that the human mind is designed to “do” morality, just as it's designed to

do language, sexuality, music, and many other things described in popular books reporting the latest scientific findings. But I chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it's also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental.

The word *righteous* comes from the old Norse word *rettviss* and the old English word *rihtwis*, both of which mean “just, upright, virtuous.”³ This meaning has been carried into the modern English words *righteous* and *righteousness*, although nowadays those words have strong religious connotations because they are usually used to translate the Hebrew word *tzedek*. *Tzedek* is a common word in the Hebrew Bible, often used to describe people who act in accordance with God's wishes, but it is also an attribute of God and of God's judgment of people (which is often harsh but always thought to be just).

The linkage of righteousness and judgmentalism is captured in some modern definitions of *righteous*, such as “arising from an outraged sense of justice, morality, or fair play.”⁴ The link also appears in the term *self-righteous*, which means “convinced of one's own righteousness, especially in contrast with the actions and beliefs of others; narrowly moralistic and intolerant.”⁵ I want to show you that an obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is the normal human condition. It is a feature of our evolutionary design, not a bug or error that crept into minds that would otherwise be objective and rational.⁶

Our righteous minds made it possible for human beings—but no other animals—to produce large cooperative groups, tribes, and nations without the glue of kinship. But at the same time, our righteous minds guarantee that our cooperative groups will always be cursed by moralistic strife. Some degree of conflict among groups may even be necessary for the health and development of any society. When I was a teenager I wished for world peace, but now I yearn for a world in which competing ideologies are kept in balance, systems of accountability keep us all from getting away with too much, and fewer people believe that righteous ends justify violent means. Not a very romantic wish, but one that we might actually achieve.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

This book has three parts, which you can think of as three separate books—except that each one depends on the one before it. Each part presents one major principle of moral psychology.

Part I is about the first principle: *Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second.*⁷ Moral intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously, long before moral reasoning has a chance to get started, and those first intuitions tend to drive our later reasoning. If you think that moral reasoning is something we do to figure out the truth, you'll be constantly frustrated by how foolish, biased, and illogical people become when they disagree with you. But if you think about moral reasoning as a skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas—to justify our own actions and to defend the teams we belong to—then things will make a lot more sense. Keep your eye on the intuitions, and don't take people's moral arguments at face value. They're mostly post hoc constructions made up on the fly, crafted to advance one or more strategic objectives.

The central metaphor of these four chapters is that *the mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant, and the rider's job is to serve the elephant.* The rider is our conscious reasoning—the stream of words and images of which we are fully aware. The elephant is the other 99 percent of mental processes—the ones that occur outside of awareness but that actually govern most of our behavior.⁸ I developed this metaphor in my last book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, where I described how the rider and elephant work together, sometimes poorly, as we stumble through life in search of meaning and connection. In this book I'll use the metaphor to solve puzzles such as why it seems like everyone (else) is a hypocrite⁹ and why political partisans are so willing to believe outrageous lies and conspiracy theories. I'll also use the metaphor to show you how you can better persuade people who seem unresponsive to reason.

Part II is about the second principle of moral psychology, which is that *there's more to morality than harm and fairness.* The central metaphor of these four chapters is that *the righteous mind is like a tongue*

with six taste receptors. Secular Western moralities are like cuisines that try to activate just one or two of these receptors—either concerns about harm and suffering, or concerns about fairness and injustice. But people have so many other powerful moral intuitions, such as those related to liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. I'll explain where these six taste receptors come from, how they form the basis of the world's many moral cuisines, and why politicians on the right have a built-in advantage when it comes to cooking meals that voters like.

Part III is about the third principle: *Morality binds and blinds.* The central metaphor of these four chapters is that *human beings are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee.* Human nature was produced by natural selection working at two levels simultaneously. Individuals compete with individuals within every group, and we are the descendants of primates who excelled at that competition. This gives us the ugly side of our nature, the one that is usually featured in books about our evolutionary origins. We are indeed selfish hypocrites so skilled at putting on a show of virtue that we fool even ourselves.

But human nature was also shaped as groups competed with other groups. As Darwin said long ago, the most cohesive and cooperative groups generally beat the groups of selfish individualists. Darwin's ideas about group selection fell out of favor in the 1960s, but recent discoveries are putting his ideas back into play, and the implications are profound. We're not always selfish hypocrites. We also have the ability, under special circumstances, to shut down our petty selves and become like cells in a larger body, or like bees in a hive, working for the good of the group. These experiences are often among the most cherished of our lives, although our hivishness can blind us to other moral concerns. Our bee-like nature facilitates altruism, heroism, war, and genocide.

Once you see our righteous minds as primate minds with a hivish overlay, you get a whole new perspective on morality, politics, and religion. I'll show that our "higher nature" allows us to be profoundly altruistic, but that altruism is mostly aimed at members of our own groups. I'll show that religion is (probably) an evolutionary adaptation for binding groups together and helping them to create

communities with a shared morality. It is not a virus or a parasite, as some scientists (the “New Atheists”) have argued in recent years. And I’ll use this perspective to explain why some people are conservative, others are liberal (or progressive), and still others become libertarians. People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds.

(A note on terminology: In the United States, the word *liberal* refers to progressive or left-wing politics, and I will use the word in this sense. But in Europe and elsewhere, the word *liberal* is truer to its original meaning—valuing liberty above all else, including in economic activities. When Europeans use the word *liberal*, they often mean something more like the American term *libertarian*, which cannot be placed easily on the left-right spectrum.¹⁰ Readers from outside the United States may want to swap in the words *progressive* or *left-wing* whenever I say *liberal*.)

In the coming chapters I’ll draw on the latest research in neuroscience, genetics, social psychology, and evolutionary modeling, but the take-home message of the book is ancient. It is the realization that we are all self-righteous hypocrites:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.
(MATTHEW 7:3–5)

Enlightenment (or wisdom, if you prefer) requires us all to take the logs out of our own eyes and then escape from our ceaseless, petty, and divisive moralism. As the eighth-century Chinese Zen master Sen-ts’an wrote:

The Perfect Way is only difficult
for those who pick and choose;
Do not like, do not dislike;

all will then be clear.
Make a hairbreadth difference,
and Heaven and Earth are set apart;
If you want the truth to stand clear before you,
never be for or against.
The struggle between “for” and “against”
is the mind’s worst disease.¹¹

I’m not saying we should live our lives like Sen-ts’an. In fact, I believe that a world without moralism, gossip, and judgment would quickly decay into chaos. But if we want to *understand* ourselves, our divisions, our limits, and our potentials, we need to step back, drop the moralism, apply some moral psychology, and analyze the game we’re all playing.

Let us now examine the psychology of this struggle between “for” and “against.” It is a struggle that plays out in each of our righteous minds, and among all of our righteous groups.

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PART I

Intuitions Come First,
Strategic Reasoning Second

Central Metaphor

*The mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant,
and the rider's job is to serve the elephant.*

Where Does Morality Come From?

I'm going to tell you a brief story. Pause after you read it and decide whether the people in the story did anything morally wrong.

A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this.

If you are like most of the well-educated people in my studies, you felt an initial flash of disgust, but you hesitated before saying the family had done anything *morally* wrong. After all, the dog was dead already, so they didn't hurt it, right? And it was their dog, so they had a right to do what they wanted with the carcass, no? If I pushed you to make a judgment, odds are you'd give me a nuanced answer, something like "Well, I think it's disgusting, and I think they should have just buried the dog, but I wouldn't say it was *morally* wrong."

OK, here's a more challenging story:

A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he